# THE BOY'S OWN ANNUAL

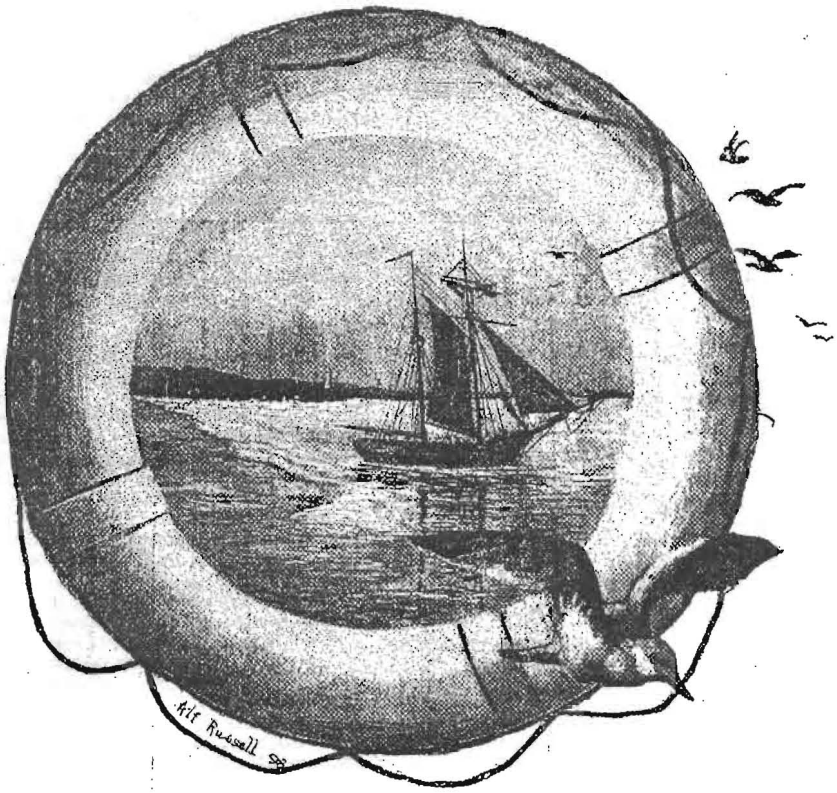
*Dimicat cum parvi nostri Carnage libelli*

London
"Boy's Own Paper" Office
56 Paternoster Row

## HOW FLETCHER SAVED THE "FISH EAGLE"

### A STORY OF THE BEHRING SEA.

By Harold Bindloss.



One dismal night in May, the sealing schooner *Fish Eagle* rolled southwards under close-reefed mainsail through the thickly falling drizzle that veiled the Behring Sea. The wind had fallen lighter with the darkness, though the swell ran high and steep, and amid a wild clatter of blocks and groaning of the booms, the little schooner swung up and down the seas. One moment she dipped her bowsprit into the long back of a swell which lapped brimming and black to the cathead, and the next, with a wild plunge, hove her forefoot out of the ocean, while the backwash streamed down her bows like surf on a half-tide rock. Her deck was sloppy and greasy, and cumbered with nested boats, and she polluted the air half a mile to lee with the smell of the rancid blubber which lies next the fur-seal's skin.

A few fur-clad seamen lounged over the quarter rail, and one tall figure, dressed in a coat of pure white hair, which would have cost him its weight in silver but that he slew its original owner upon the ice, gripped the jerking tiller with a line about his wrist. Forward, behind the dories, a group of Siwash Indians squatted on the deck, dipping strips of half-rotten halibut into a jar of strong seal oil, and sucking their tarry fingers each time a piece went down. The muddy green waters of the Behring sea are alternately swept by tempest or veiled in mist and rain, so Marvin Fletcher, the skipper, intended to run no risks of carrying too much canvas at night when he was bound south with three thousand skins on board.

"A week of this scud and darkness, with no sight of sun or star, has mixed up all my reckoning," he said, wiping the rain from his eyes. "Still, we shouldn't be far from the Komandorskies, and they're ugly lumps to strike. Then we'll have to get water somewhere. There won't be a drop left soon."

"That's what comes of hanging on too long," the gaunt mate answered drily. "If you run over to Kamchatka, the Russians will have you, sure, and the Yankees are watching the Pribiloffs like a hungry cat after a mouse"; and Fletcher made no answer, for he knew the words were true.

For some years the free-lance sealer had been an outlaw of the seas, with every man's hand against him, and his hand against every man. He might only kill the fur-seals with the rifle in open water, and if ever he ventured within ten miles of the Pribiloffs or Komandorski Isles, his schooner was liable to seizure. But in a region of mist and tempest it is hard to compute distance exactly, and mistakes were made on both sides at times. The sealing owners claimed compensation from the Government for vessels fired at on the high seas, or towed away to Siberia, while the Russians from Komandorski, and the American lessees of the Pribiloffs, complained that bands of armed men landed from the dories and slew the seals by hundreds in the rookeries ashore. Thus the enterprising sealer cost the Governments of three nations a heavy sum in maintaining a fleet of gunboats to watch his devious ways. The British and American cruisers he eluded where he could, or ran the risk of confiscation as the chances of the game. But between the sealermen and the officers of the Czar there was always war to the knife, and stories were told at Sitka of grim fights by the lonely beaches, or boats smashed on the open seas, for the gunboat commanders found out that the sealers were hard men to coerce.

Presently the mate, holding on by a straining backstay, listened intently. "We must be running down on the Komandorskies—you can hear the sea-catchies now," he said; and an Indian hailed from the bows, "Rookery noise ahead."

They were right, for by-and-by there came up from leeward a confused, bewildering sound, not unlike processions of locomotives blowing off steam at once. Then, as the schooner rolled on into the night, many notes became apparent, a discordant whistling and piping, mingled with a deep bass tone, and the skipper glanced anxiously down wind as he said, "The Komandorskies, sure enough."

Now, the winter haunts of the fur-seal are not known to any man, though a few out of the countless millions are met with all the way from the far Antarctic ice to the islands of Japan. Each year, however, the endless herds return when spring comes round, to two groups of little islands in the misty Behring Sea. Then the big seal-bulls haul out through the fringe of surf which eternally rings about each shingle spit or sandy beach of the little Komandorskies or sea-beaten Pribiloffs, and, for fourteen days or thereabouts, fight desperately, and often to the death, for a few square yards in the rookery. When the fierce struggle is over, and, legion after legion, the cow seals come up out of the sea, for six long weeks the sea-catchie apparently neither eats nor sleeps, but keeps grim watch over his seraglio, roaring incessant defiance to any that approach. The sound of this contention rings out through fog and darkness; for if in the short summer there is no real night in the Behring Sea, so thick is the air with moisture that there is often no real day, and the whalers groping northwards listen for it as they would for a lightship gun.

Meantime, the holluschuckie, or young batchelor seals, haul out in turn, but they must herd apart, and are slain in hundreds by the lessees of the isles, and, it is more than suspected, by the free-lance sealer too. When about two months are over, the fur seals take themselves away, and touch no land, so far as human knowledge goes, until, after scouring the breadth of the Pacific, they return the following year to the very same beach again.

"Copper Island," said the skipper. "I know the roar of the big rookery well. There's lots of good ice water in the lagoon behind Baranoff head, and Avatchka reef breaks the run of the sea. We must risk it, and slip in there."

"It's certain confiscation, with those fresh-caught skins aboard," answered the mate. "There's generally a gunboat hanging round, and you would never convince her commander that you didn't kill the seals ashore; still, I suppose we'll have to chance it. Get the port anchor over, and be handy with the lead."

With that half-instinctive knowledge which is better than any chart, Fletcher groped his vessel shorewards by the lead and the din of the rookery until he could hear the ground-swell grinding the iron teeth of the reefs, and a dim black head loomed out more solid than the mist.

"There, you see the long kelp streamers, forty feet of water beyond," he said, jamming the helm a-lee. "Stand by to let go your mudhook," and the schooner swept in a long shoot to windward ere the anchor thundered down. Then the order was, "Furl the head-sails loosely; let the fore and afters stand. Get over the two best dories; the mate will go ashore. Come back as quickly as may be, and listen for any sound. It means jail in Vladivostock if the Russians catch us here."

The mate went ashore in the dory, and managed to make a landing in the shelter of the head. Then they filled the six-hooped breakers with melted ice and snow, and while they rolled them towards the beach-line, the mate sat down to wait. At times the sky became flushed with a curious grey light, not unlike dawn at home, but this was always followed by an increase of the downpour and a thickening of the haze, while the darkness was filled with the tumult of the crowded rookery. At first the uproar was deafening, but when his ears got used to the chaos of sound, he could hear the roar of the groundswell and the backwash hurrying down. Then there was a clatter of feet on the shingle behind him, as the crew brought the last of the breakers in, and one gaunt hunter, who worked on shares, said suggestively, "There's thousands of holluschuckie—we could skin a few score in an hour."

"No," was the mate's gruff answer. "We've run this cruise on the square, and she's nearly full to the hatches with honestly taken skins. Launch the first dory handy, and I'll go off ahead. The skipper will be getting anxious if we stay away too long."

The men waded almost to their shoulders in the backwash ere the loaded craft was run through the surf when a roller went frothing out. Then, while two of her crew flung out the brine, the rest pulled easy, and all bent their backs to the oars again when they left the shelter of the head. The breeze was freshening fast from seaward, and it was all that they could do to drive her out through the long and steep-backed roll.

"No help for it, empty two breakers. It's either the water or us," said the mate, as a creamy smother lapped in across the side. Then he glanced aloft at the wreaths of whirling scud, again at the heaving waste astern, adding anxiously, "More wind all the time, and I can't see the other dory. Can anyone hear oars?"

"It took the two crews all they knew to launch this basket through. I should say they're waitin' for a smooth, or a pickin' theirselves out of the surf," answered the grizzled hunter, who pulled the nearest oar. Then the man broke out sharply, "There's somethin' else than oars; it's like the thumpin' of engines. A Russian gunboat, sure."

"'Vast pulling," said the mate, "but keep her head to sea, or she'll roll us out to the threshers, water-casks and all."

So the men kept very silent, and the mate stared with all his eyes, until he made out a glimmer of luminous vapour swinging through the haze. Something indistinct and shadowy came up out of the night, and his trained eyes caught the whiteness where the sea parted before streaming bows. Then, with no gleam of light about her but the shimmer over her funnel-ring, a Russian gunboat slid through the rain towards them. He could see the welter of water along the straight wall-side, and the rollers hissing and tumbling in the wake of the throbbing screw.

So the mate held his breath and waited, until a voice cried aloud in Russian, when he started half-upright in the stern sheets, but a seaman pulled him down. "They're heavin' the lead, an' feelin' their way under 'Vatchka reef," the man said softly. "Let them go, then we'll pull like mad, or the skipper will be slippin' his anchor—he knows what 'Vlostock means."

"The skipper won't go without you," said the mate in a hoarse whisper. "Thank goodness, she's gone ahead. Pull now, hard and steady, or we'll be blown ashore again."

After much weary labour they reached the schooner's side, and Fletcher's face was anxious as he listened to their tale. "We might slip the anchor and run for it now, but I can't leave the men," he said. "Knock out the shackle-pin handy, and see your halliards clear. I wonder if the Russian is looking for an anchorage inside of Avatchka reef—the sea is getting heavy—where can that dory be?"

So they waited, intent and uneasy, while the *Fish Eagle* plunged her bows more sharply into the breast of every sea, until a faint flash, like the glimmer of a lantern, came three times out of the darkness, a signal there was need of aid. "They haven't seen the gunboat; but they can't pull her off against the wind and sea—ah, they're at it again!" said the mate. "We daren't show a light in answer. I hope the Russian won't see it as he gropes along the land."

"We'll slip, and run inshore for them," answered Marvin Fletcher. "That water will come higher than the best French wine, but if the cruiser is near at hand, they would hear the cable, sure."

The mate swung a heavy hammer, some one knocked up the pawls; there was a strident roar of cable, and the headsails fluttered aloft. The skipper jammed his helm a-weather as the jibs were sheeted home, and, gathering way, the *Fish Eagle* drove slashing over the long roll of a spiteful sea, straight in towards the land, until a man ran aft from her fore-deck. "The steamer's comin' down," he said.

Staring hard to windward, Fletcher made out something that was only black and shapeless, driving in from sea, and his voice rang hard as he said, "In spite of all the Russians, I'm going to have that boat. Lay out on the boom and loose both rows of reefs. When you've done, the mate will slack the earing, and we'll set the whole sail as we round her up to get the boat aboard." So with her loose canvas thundering, the *Fish Eagle* ripped through the sea, until, jamming down his tiller, the skipper swept her round the boat in a long shoot head to wind. "You'll jump for your lives when you reach us, and hook the tackles on," he shouted. "There's a Russian cruiser coming. It's open sea or 'Vlostock jail."

Then, as the schooner lay plunging and diving with the sea on her weather bow, they set up the lofty mainsail, and strong hands gripping the tackles, whipped the boat across the rail. "Lee sheets," shouted her skipper, and as the *Fish Eagle* gathered way the men stared out with anxious eyes at the long black streak to windward, coming down on them hand over hand. But the free-lance sealer's vessel is built clean and lean for speed, and with the whole mainsail on her, the *Fish Eagle* buried her lee bulwarks in the welter thrown off the roaring bows. "She'll have to stand it somehow," said Fletcher, as the long, fine entrance pitched into the breast of a sea, while tons of icy water burst across the rail. Her wake was like a steamer's and a huge, dark hollow yawned beneath her weather side, as the breadths of straining canvas ripped her through the sea. But the gunboat was steaming faster, and glancing up to weather, the skipper saw a red tongue of flame leap out from her reeling funnel.

"We took every skin that's in her honestly and fair, and I'll ram her ashore on the worst of the reefs before they set foot aboard," said Fletcher grimly. "The Russian draws six feet more water, anyway, than we're drawing now, and if we can cross the surf on Avatchka reef, we'll lose her in the dark. They could never hurt us with their guns in a jump of a sea like this. Stand by to heave your lead."

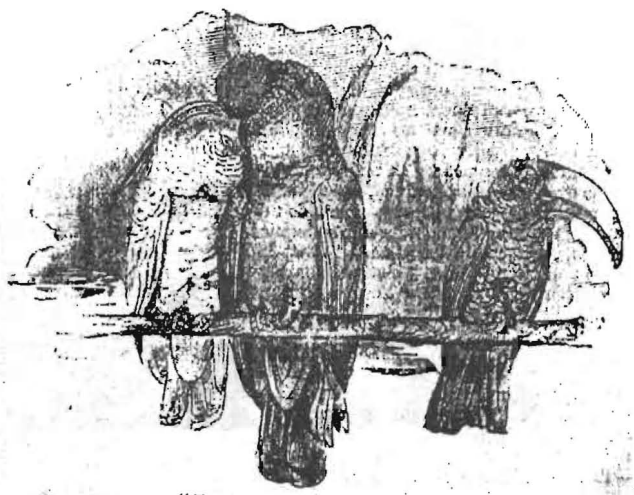
Soon the roar of breaking water drowned the noise of the rookery, and close at hand to leeward a line of spouting whiteness showed where the long rollers burst over Avatchka reef. "Four fathoms," yelled the seaman who stood in the foremast shrouds, and the skipper set his teeth as he eased the helm a little.

"Three fathom, and breakin' ahead, sir," was the next hurried hail, and quivering through every plank and stringer, the *Fish Eagle* drove through a sea. She had no time to lift her bows with that pressure of canvas on her, and a foaming mass struck her trembling head, and, rolling across the sloppy deck, poured over the rail to lee.

"Fifteen feet," hailed the dripping object hove high in the weather-shrouds, as the schooner listed more sharply with a roaring along her run. Fletcher set his back against the tiller, saying, "It's through it or lose her now!" while every man laid fast hold of that which was nearest, as her forward half sank out of sight in the sea. The decks were full to the teakwood rail, and the men were gasping and choking as they struggled to keep their feet. For a moment the swift pace slackened, and she rolled very sluggishly; then she shook herself out of the smother, and with bows and stern streaming brine alike, drove on to meet the next.

"Three fathom, an' breakin' smoother," came aft the cheery hail; and presently, battered, and swept of all that was movable, the little vessel rolled out of the piled-up surf. Then the skipper glanced behind him, and, shaking the water from his hair, chuckled as he said, "The Russians hardly expected we would cross the Avatchka reef. By the time she goes round outside it we'll be far away in the haze, and I should say a steamboat's commander would look for us dead down wind. So we'll close haul her round the lee of the island, then stretch out on a bowline, and every knot the gunboat steams will be another knot away."

Fletcher was probably right in his surmises, for when morning broke the *Fish Eagle* was alone on a wide grey sea, with the mist rolling along the northern horizon; and her crew were very thankful as they turned her head towards the south.



"Two's company—three's none."